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# Thomas Aquinas and Alfred North Whitehead on God's Action in the World

Thomas E. Hosinski

*University of Portland*, [hosinski@up.edu](mailto:hosinski@up.edu)

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**In Search of a Contemporary World View:  
Contrasting Thomistic and Whiteheadian Approaches**  
Research Article

**Open Access**

Thomas E. Hosinski

# Thomas Aquinas and Alfred North Whitehead on God's Action in the World

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**Abstract:** Thomas Aquinas' *intentions* in his position that God acts through secondary causes are both laudable and correct. In affirming God's action within secondary causes Thomas intended to affirm true freedom and contingency in the world and the creatures' limited participation in God's creative power. But his interpretation of these topics rests on assumptions about divinity that subvert his intentions. This article summarizes Thomas' analysis and discusses the principal difficulties with his interpretation of God's action. It then presents an interpretation of how Alfred North Whitehead's position on divine action avoids these difficulties and achieves a more coherent understanding of God's action in the world, even though it too requires revision. If Whitehead's metaphysics is revised to think of creativity as the divine life rather than as ultimately distinct from God, then it, too, presents God as sharing the divine life with creatures by endowing them with the creativity and freedom to create themselves on the divinely-given ground of possibility. Thomas' *intentions* and a revised Whiteheadian interpretation of divine action are compatible and complement each other on the topic of divine action in and through creatures and on the idea of existence as participation in the divine life.

**Keywords:** Thomas Aquinas, Whitehead, God's action, creativity, possibility, divine knowledge, freedom, contingency

The topic of God's action in the world is a complex one that could conceivably include not just the doctrines of creation and providence, but also grace, salvation and eschatology. Although a complete discussion would touch on all of these, due to limitations of space I will restrict my discussion to divine action as considered in the traditional topics of creation and providence. When creation was thought of as a singular event that happened "once upon a time" in the past, the doctrine of providence focused on how God continued to interact with the world God had created. But when creation is understood to be an ongoing process, the concerns of the doctrines of creation and providence tend to merge or at least to be very strongly related. They are also closely related in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, but in a different way.

Thomas Aquinas' understanding of God's action in the world is intimately connected to his understanding of causality, God's knowledge, God's will, and how God creates. It is a testimony to his consistency that all these topics are connected so closely. I would affirm that Thomas' *intentions* in his position that God acts through secondary causes are both laudable and correct. But Thomas' interpretation of these topics rests on certain assumptions about divinity that I believe subvert his intentions. I will first summarize Thomas' analysis and then discuss the principal difficulties with his interpretation of God's action, especially through secondary causes. I will then present my interpretation of how Alfred North Whitehead's position on divine action avoids these difficulties and achieves a more coherent understanding of God's action in the world, even though it too requires revision. I will conclude with the claim that Thomas' *intentions* and a revised Whiteheadian interpretation of divine action are compatible and that this offers a locus for fruitful discussion between Thomists and process theologians and philosophers.

**\*Corresponding author: Thomas E. Hosinski:** University of Portland, E-mail: hosinski@up.edu

## Thomas Aquinas on God's Action in the World

Thomas affirms that God is present and active in all things, “as an agent is present to that upon which it acts.”<sup>1</sup> This presence and action of God takes several forms in Thomas’ analysis. It is expressed in all four types of causality, as well as in Thomas’ affirmation that God both sustains secondary causes in existence and acts through them. God is the “final cause” or “end” (goal), drawing every operation of created agents to God. God is the first cause and necessary being, the source of all secondary and contingent efficient causes. God is the “unmoved mover” that in an ultimate sense “moves” all secondary causes to action. God is the ultimate “formal cause” in the sense that God gives to all secondary causes their “forms,” enabling and empowering them to be agents and to act in specific ways. God is also the Creator of all material causes (or matter). And finally, as Creator God conserves and sustains all material and secondary causes in their forms and powers. From all of this, Thomas concludes:

... it follows that God works intimately in all things. For this reason in Holy Scripture the operations of nature are attributed to God as operating in nature, according to Job 10:11: “*Thou hast clothed me with skin and flesh; Thou hast put me together with bones and sinews.*”<sup>2</sup>

This is a lovely vision of God’s presence and action in the created world and so long as one does not pursue critical questions too far, it seems to allow us to say that God acts in and through secondary causes. Each is active in its own way: God in the ways I have just summarized; while secondary causes, Thomas asserts, exercise true causal power as efficient causes.<sup>3</sup> This gives the appearance of allowing the creatures of the world an independence and integrity of action of their own.<sup>4</sup> But the position Thomas seems to *intend* here is actually subverted by several of his assumptions about divinity, his conclusions regarding God’s knowledge and will, and his understanding of how God creates.

As is well known, Thomas argues that God creates through God’s knowledge. For creatures, *to be is to be known by God*. In order to grasp the difficulties resulting from this position, we need to consider what Thomas says about God’s knowledge. First, Thomas states that in God the act of understanding—the operation producing knowledge—must be God’s essence and God’s being. This follows from God being pure act (without potentiality) and from God’s perfection, “because the act of understanding is the perfection and act of the one understanding.”<sup>5</sup> If God’s act of understanding were something other than God’s essence and being, then that “something other” would be the perfection and act of the divine essence and the divine essence would stand in a relation of potentiality to an act other than itself. All of this is impossible since God must be pure act and perfect. Therefore, God’s act of understanding must be God’s essence and being.

From this conclusion a number of implications follow. If God’s act of understanding is God’s essence and being, then God’s knowledge must have exactly the same attributes as God’s essence and being: it must be simple, perfect, unchanging, eternal, not in dependence on anything other than God, unaffected by anything other than God, necessary, and so on. Thus God’s knowledge of all things is not dependent on anything other than God, and this is possible, Thomas argues, because in knowing Godself God knows all things.<sup>6</sup> If this were not true, then God would be in dependence on creatures for God’s knowledge and this would compromise God’s perfection, aseity, and absoluteness. Furthermore, God’s knowledge must be *creative*, the cause of all things.<sup>7</sup> But how can this be? In our experience, knowing depends on the existence

1 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 8, a. 1. All quotations are from the English Dominican translation (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947).

2 Ibid., Ia, q. 105, a. 5.

3 See Ibid., Ia, q. 103, a. 6 & ad 2.

4 Elizabeth A. Johnson, for example, has defended Thomas’ position on secondary causality as forming a basis for a contemporary theology of divine providence that can affirm chance, randomness, and “the free play of the undetermined realms of matter and spirit” in the universe as understood by contemporary science; Johnson, “Does God Play Dice?,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 3-18 (quotation from p. 18).

5 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 14, a. 4.

6 Ibid., Ia, q. 14, a. 5, 6, & 7.

7 Ibid., Ia, q. 14, a. 8.

of the known thing; or, as Aristotle puts it, “the knowable thing is prior to knowledge, and is its measure.”<sup>8</sup> It seems, then, that knowledge cannot be the cause of the known thing. Thomas answers this objection by arguing that God's knowledge is fundamentally different than our knowledge. What Aristotle says is true of *human* knowledge, but God's knowledge stands, as it were, on the other side of the known object: God's knowledge is prior to and the measure of all knowable things, because God creates all knowable things by God's knowledge of them.<sup>9</sup> God's knowledge is like that of an architect who builds a house and knows what it will be before the house actually exists.

If God's knowledge is perfect, immutable, necessary, not in dependence on the world, and the cause of all things that exist, does this not imply that God's knowledge imposes necessity on things? Does this not imply that there can be no truly contingent events? And most importantly, does this not imply that there is no freedom in the universe, not even in human beings? This would be a serious problem for Christian theology, because the reality of human freedom is absolutely crucial to the understanding of sin, which in turn forms the foundation for the doctrine of salvation and the understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore Thomas must resolve this apparent problem. He does so in an ingenious way, though the solution has serious difficulties. He argues that since God's knowledge is eternal, and since “eternity, being simultaneously whole, comprises all time,”<sup>10</sup> God knows all contingent events (including all of what are to us future contingent events) as *present facts*; and this means that God's creative knowledge of contingent events is certain and necessary without imposing necessity on them. That is, the events in relation to their proximate causes in the temporal world are truly contingent in that they might have been otherwise; but since in eternity God “sees” not just possible outcomes of various proximate causes, but also what will actually happen, God's knowledge is necessary and certain. This is similar to the way in which we can know past and present contingent events with certainty and necessity. For example, I can know with certainty that as I wrote this sentence I was sitting at my computer, even though I also know that I was perfectly free then to stand up and walk around. In this way, Thomas believes, both contingency and freedom are preserved without violating the necessity, immutability, perfection, and independence of God's knowledge.

Thomas even provides an interesting analogy for God's necessary knowledge of future contingent events.<sup>11</sup> When you are travelling on a road, you cannot see what lies ahead of you on that road in the future, nor can you know who else in the future will start travelling on that road. But if you could get up high enough so that your vision could take in the entire road, then you could see at once all the travelers on the road. In a similar way, because eternity comprises all of time, God can know all past, present, and future contingent events as *facts*, and so know them with certainty and necessity, even though they occur as truly contingent events in the temporal world.

This analogy, however, and the underlying understanding of eternity's relation to time, has a major flaw: it treats time as if it were space. Space is already fully extended in its three dimensions,<sup>12</sup> so that for a sufficiently small finite segment of it one could see it all if one could gain a sufficiently distant vantage point. For example, an orbiting satellite can take in the entire length of the I-5 interstate highway from the Canadian to the Mexican borders along the west coast of the United States. Time, however, is fundamentally different from space in that, so far as we can judge from our experience, it is *not* already fully extended; the future is not yet *actual*, as the past and present are. The future is *real*, in the sense that we know *something* will occur; but it has not yet occurred, and so the future is real only as *possibility* and not as *fact*. It is hard to understand, then, how even God can know the future as *fact*, since it does not yet exist as fact. Or, if one wants to hold that God in eternity *does* know it as fact, it is hard to understand how this can avoid imposing

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX 1 (as cited by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 14, a. 8 obj. 3).

<sup>9</sup> See *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 14, a. 8 ad 3. Thomas adds that God's knowledge is the cause of all things insofar as God's will is joined to it. See *Ibid.*, Ia, q. 14, a. 8 & a. 9 ad 3. All of the major points made in his discussion of God's knowledge are paralleled in his discussion of God's will; see *Ibid.*, Ia, q. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Ia, q. 14, a. 13; see also Ia, q. 10, a. 2 ad 4.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*, Ia, q. 14, a. 13 ad 3.

<sup>12</sup> I am aware that according to the current scientific understanding of the universe space is continually expanding, but for the purpose of discussing Thomas' analogy, we may safely ignore this.

necessity on events. How can I be *truly* free to stand up and walk around ten minutes from now if God knows from all eternity that I will be sitting? I am not *truly* free to do anything other than what God knows from all eternity I will do. If I were, then I would have the power to make God's knowledge mistaken; and this cannot be, because it would compromise the completeness and perfection of God's knowledge. Thus despite Thomas' attempt to affirm the truth of freedom and contingency in the world while retaining the position that God's creative knowledge is necessarily eternal, independent, infallible, and unchanging, his solution is not coherent and does not succeed.

Thomas' important argument for the understanding of God's action in the world through natural agents unfortunately also suffers from incoherence. In Thomas' thought this is expressed as the efficacy of secondary causes. There is no doubt that Thomas intended to affirm that created secondary causes actually have the power to cause, and thus participate in the divine creative power. For example, in discussing God's providential governance of the world, Thomas says:

. . . whatsoever causes [God] assigns to certain effects, He gives them the power to produce those effects. . . . [T]here are certain intermediaries of God's providence, for He governs things inferior by superior, not because of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas does not mean that the agents of the created world are autonomous and independent causes operating apart from God. They are in fact agents of God's action: God "governs some things by means of others." And again, "God so governs things that He makes some of them to be causes of others in government," allowing them to share in "the perfection of causality."<sup>14</sup> I believe Thomas intends to support a very important and beautiful idea here, the idea that creatures participate in a limited way in God's own creativity, or to state it more generally, that created beings exist by participating in the divine being.

But there is a major incoherence in the way Thomas expresses this idea when we consider it in relation to God's eternal, unchanging knowledge and will. In discussing the will of God, Thomas says:

Since then the divine will is perfectly efficacious, it follows not only that things are done, which God wills to be done, but also that they are done in the way that He wills. Now God wills some things to be done necessarily, some contingently, so that there be a right order in things for the perfection of the universe. Therefore, to some effects He has attached unfailing necessary causes, from which the effects follow necessarily; but to others defectible and contingent causes, from which the effects arise contingently. Hence it is not because the proximate causes are contingent that the effects willed by God happen contingently; but God has prepared contingent causes for them because He has willed that they should happen contingently.<sup>15</sup>

This sounds so reasonable: there truly are contingent events because God wills them to happen contingently and "prepares" contingent secondary causes for them. But how can the contingent secondary causes truly be contingent in their effects and how can the contingent secondary causes truly have any independence and integrity of action of their own, if God from all eternity knows and wills the outcome? Since neither God's will nor God's knowledge can change (without compromising God's perfection, aseity, and absoluteness, which is unthinkable for Thomas), there is no *real* possibility of the contingent secondary causes having any other effects than the ones God knows and wills from eternity. How can I *really* have freedom and independence to do something other than what God from all eternity knows with certain and unchanging knowledge and wills with perfect efficaciousness? We can call this contingency and free will all we want, we can say ceaselessly that divine providence does not impose necessity on those things God wills to happen contingently,<sup>16</sup> but so long as God's knowledge and God's will must be eternal and unchanging, creative and perfectly efficacious, the result is indistinguishable from absolute determinism.

Thomas' intent cannot be faulted: to affirm free will, contingency and the power of secondary causes in the universe is the correct position for Christian theology. It is correct to hold that God works through

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Ia, q. 22, a. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Ia, q. 103, a. 6 & ad 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Ia, q. 19, a. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Ia, q. 22, a. 4 and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 72.7.

secondary causes. And to hold that God allows the created agents of the universe to participate in God's own creative power by granting them the ability to act as true causes is a beautiful expression of the ancient Christian conviction that all things exist by participating in the being or life of God. But the assumptions and implications of the Greek metaphysics that controls Thomas' discussion subvert his intentions and create serious problems for the positions he wants to uphold. The trick of thinking that all of future time is somehow already "fact" for God in eternity—so that God can know every future event and being with perfect, necessary, and unchanging knowledge and will them with perfect efficaciousness, thus bringing them into being *without* imposing necessity on them and absolutely determining the course of universal history—this is in fact a trick. It is metaphysical sleight of hand distracting us from a major incoherence. It does not work.

## Whitehead and God's Action in the World

I cannot rehearse the details of Whitehead's metaphysics here. Suffice it to say that in Whitehead's metaphysics God's primary action on the world is by the organization, valuation, presentation, and "lure" of possibilities. The Primordial Nature of God, Whitehead says, is the unconditioned grasping and valuation of all potentials or possibilities.<sup>17</sup> This function of God establishes the basic order necessary for there to be any course of actual events, any universe, whatsoever. The order is the outcome of God's *valuation* of all potentials or possibilities. This establishes not just the general metaphysical conditions and more specific conditions governing our universe,<sup>18</sup> but also the relevance or irrelevance of every possibility to any particular standpoint in the actual world. *Every* possibility is included in God's organization and valuation of the possibilities for the universe. This means that for any standpoint in the universe—which is, of course, a possibility that can be envisioned apart from any experience of the actual course of events—the relevant possibilities are "graded" in an order of value that reflects God's preference: there will be one possibility for that specific situation that God values most highly, with varying valuations for the other possibilities, including one God values least (or even abhors).

God's organization of possibilities is thus the ultimate ground of both order and novelty. God's valuation of all possibilities establishes the ground of order (which is thus fundamentally an *aesthetic* order<sup>19</sup>) and the Primordial Nature of God serves as the limitless source of novel possibilities. God creates each actual entity in the universe not by determining what it shall be or by foreseeing what it shall be, but by making it *really possible*: endowing it with its possibilities and its 'initial subjective aim,' its 'living immediacy' as a becoming subject. The free and autonomous becoming of the actual entity in its situation is influenced by the attractiveness of the possibilities; the possibilities "lure" the actual entity to actualize them. The 'initial subjective aim' initially orients the becoming actual entity toward selecting the possibility God values most highly. This is because the 'initial subjective aim' also constitutes the actual entity's initial standard of value, enabling it to experience and respond to value, and this is initially in harmony with God's valuation of the possibilities open to that process of becoming.<sup>20</sup>

But the process of becoming is influenced by many factors in addition to the Primordial Nature of God. All past actual entities (which, it ought to be remembered, are *actualized* possibilities) to one degree or another influence the present process of becoming. In the course of its process of becoming, these other influences may exert a higher relative weight than the influence of God's valuation of the possibilities. The becoming actual entity is free to alter its subjective aim and select any of the possibilities open to it, even the one God abhors. Thus although God's creative influence on every actual entity is necessary for that actual entity to become, it is not determinative. In the end, the actual entity's own selection or 'decision'

<sup>17</sup> See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 31; see also 40, 87-88, 247, 257, 344, 349.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead argues that God's Primordial Nature is responsible not just for the general metaphysical conditions, but also for more specific conditions, such as the dimensional character of the actual world. See Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 255-57 and *Process and Reality*, 40, 46, 87-88, 108, 164, 207, 247, 257, 344-45.

<sup>19</sup> See Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> See Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact*, 164-76 for a detailed explanation of this point.

among the possibilities open to it is the ‘reason’ for what it becomes and that decision can be influenced in a variety of ways.

God acts *internally* in the becoming of every actual entity, by making it really possible and luring it toward actualizing the possibility God values most highly. God does not act *externally* upon actual entities or “societies” of actual entities as a competing agent. Although developed differently, I believe this position is quite similar to Thomas Aquinas’ *intent* in his argument that God acts in and through secondary causes. But there are also several important differences between Whitehead’s and Thomas’ positions that allow Whitehead’s position to avoid the incoherencies that, in my view, subvert Thomas’ intentions.

Most importantly, in Whitehead’s metaphysics God does not create actual entities through God’s eternal and unchanging *knowledge* of them, but rather by envisioning every actual entity as *possible* and endowing each of them with all they need to determine or create themselves. There is, in short, a distinction between God’s *understanding* and God’s *knowledge* that reflects the distinction between mere possibility and fact. In Whitehead’s metaphysics, God’s understanding of all possibilities is eternal and unchanging and this makes possible an actual course of events and energizes every actual entity. But God’s *knowledge* arises from God’s *experience* of what actual entities have done with the possibilities God presented to them. Thus God’s knowledge does not occur as part of God’s role as Creator and can thus be dependent on creatures without compromising God’s perfection and independence and autonomy in God’s role as Creator.

In Whitehead’s metaphysics, in other words, creation does not mean either foreseeing or determining what any actual entity will be or what event will occur. Rather, divine creation is making possible an open and unfinished universe which will participate in God’s creative power by completing or creating itself on the divinely-given ground of possibility.<sup>21</sup> Actual entities could not become without what they receive from God, but what they become is the result of their own free selection from among the possibilities open to them.

This view clearly implies that God cannot *know* the future (in the technical sense of the word ‘know’) until actual entities in fact terminate their processes of becoming in their own ‘decisions.’ God’s knowledge is dependent on the creatures of the world. God does not create through God’s knowledge of what the creature is or will be, but rather through the presentation of what it *might* be and the aim at becoming. The temporal actual entities create and determine themselves and God’s knowledge of them *as facts* arises from receiving the completed actual entities into God’s own experience. This account of divine knowledge is coherent with the ontology of actual entities and with Whitehead’s account of the possibility of knowledge in higher-grade actual entities.<sup>22</sup> A Thomist might object that if God’s knowledge occurs in dependence on creatures, then it *does* compromise God’s absoluteness, perfection, and aseity and the entire understanding of divinity. In response I would note that Whitehead is thinking with a different understanding of perfection than the Greek philosophical tradition assumes. Perhaps the easiest way to explain this is by reference to the divine attributes.

It is not often noted by critics of process theology that in Whitehead’s philosophy of God the Primordial Nature of God has exactly the same attributes as the Christian tradition assigned to God. In the Primordial Nature God is infinite, complete, unconditioned, absolutely free, eternal, unchanging and impassible. These classical divine attributes express the conviction of both religious experience and philosophical reflection that God is the ultimate ground and source of the universe. But the tradition absolutized these attributes (in keeping with the Greek understanding of divinity) and tried to define *all* of God’s interaction with the universe from this basis, as we see in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Whitehead’s metaphysics, in contrast, recognizes that the absolute aspect of God’s role as Creator is only a half-truth.

There is another aspect of God’s relation to the universe: if God is an actual entity, God must *experience* what the actual universe has become, what it has done with the possibilities God presented to it, and in this aspect God has the *opposite* attributes. Because of the nature of the universe and God’s ongoing experience of it, God’s Consequent Nature is finite, incomplete, conditioned, partially determined, everlasting,

<sup>21</sup> I am here already expressing a revision of Whitehead’s own interpretation of creativity, a revision I will explain below.

<sup>22</sup> See Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact*, 110-24, 192-93 for a summary of Whitehead’s account of the ontological bases of knowing and how his discussion of God’s knowledge coheres with this account.

developing, and passible. These “relative” attributes—the opposite of God’s “absolute” attributes—do not compromise God’s perfection, but show how God is the supreme illustration of the metaphysical principles, not an exception to them.<sup>23</sup> Just as all actual entities must experience the universe of past actual entities, so does God; but in each attribute God is perfect in God’s receptivity. God may be finite, incomplete, conditioned, partially determined, and so on, but in each case God receives all past actual entities completely and in perfect sympathy, unlike the temporal actual entities and societies of the universe whose reception of past actual entities is imperfect and marked by limitations of perspective and exclusion.<sup>24</sup> This view does not compromise God’s perfection but shows how God is the supreme illustration of the principles illustrated in all actual entities. Thus God’s perfection is not compromised.

Because it is developed by analogy with the structure of actual entities, this understanding of the distinct aspects of God’s relation to the universe and of the different attributes of God in each aspect is a consistent and coherent metaphysical understanding of God. We can say that God is infinite *and* finite, unconditioned *and* conditioned, absolutely free *and* partially determined, impassible *and* passible, and so on,<sup>25</sup> because we can specify which attribute applies to which aspect of God’s relation to and interaction with the universe. We need not try to derive *every* aspect of God’s relation to the universe from God’s role as Creator and the absolute attributes God must possess in that role. Whitehead’s metaphysics can show quite precisely, in a way Nicholas of Cusa’s could not, how it is possible for God to be the “coincidence of opposites.”

God acts in the universe, then, not by determining outcomes or by knowing what will occur, but rather by making all things possible and luring the freedom of the temporal agents of the universe toward the best possibility in their situations. I believe, however, that there is an incoherence in Whitehead’s position on creativity that must be revised if his view of divine action is to be compatible with the intent of the Christian tradition. In his book *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead wrote a sentence that has haunted me since I first read it: “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.”<sup>26</sup> But in *Process and Reality* Whitehead separated creativity from God in a foundational way by stating that creativity is the metaphysical “ultimate” and God is its “primordial, non-temporal accident.”<sup>27</sup> God and the world, Whitehead wrote, are both “in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty.”<sup>28</sup> Partially in order to deal with the problem of evil, Whitehead did not want the creativity of the universe, which drives all processes of becoming, to be thought of as coming entirely from God. So although he held that “God is the aboriginal instance of this creativity, and is therefore the aboriginal condition which qualifies its action,”<sup>29</sup> he also held that temporal actual entities are creative in their own right, not because their creativity is a gift from God.

I believe that this separation of creativity from God subverts the profound implication of Whitehead’s own insight in *Religion in the Making* that “the world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.” If we were to revise Whitehead’s position, so that creativity were understood to be the divine life which God shares with the temporal agents of the world, then Whitehead’s metaphysics would be rendered compatible with the intent of the Christian theological tradition in its position on *creatio ex nihilo* and its affirmation of monotheism, as Langdon Gilkey argued many years ago.<sup>30</sup> It would then also be compatible with the intent of Thomas Aquinas’ argument that God shares with creatures the power of creativity or causality in acting through secondary causes.

<sup>23</sup> See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 343: “. . . God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification.”

<sup>24</sup> See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 345-46 and Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact*, 193-95.

<sup>25</sup> See Whitehead’s “antitheses” between God and the world, which reveal that God has opposite attributes depending on which aspect of God’s relation to the universe is being considered, in *Process and Reality*, 348.

<sup>26</sup> Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7; see also 31, 88, 225, 349; and Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact*, 208-12 for an analysis of Whitehead’s position on creativity.

<sup>28</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 349.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>30</sup> See Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 112-14, 248-51, 300-18, 414 n34. See also Neville, *Creativity and God*.



In affirming God's action within secondary causes Thomas Aquinas' intended to affirm true freedom and contingency in the world and the creatures' limited participation in God's creative power. Whitehead's metaphysics affirms true freedom and contingency in the universe in its understanding of God as creating by making possible an open and unfinished universe which is allowed to determine itself and complete its creation in freedom. If Whitehead's metaphysics is revised to think of creativity as the divine life rather than as ultimately distinct from God, then it, too, presents God as sharing the divine life with creatures by endowing them with the creativity and freedom to create themselves on the divinely-given ground of possibility. In such a revised Whiteheadian metaphysics, no actual entity or society of actual entities can become or exist without its creative basis, which comes directly from God; but each actual entity and society enjoys a limited freedom to complete its own creation. God creates creatures as co-creators. I believe that Thomas Aquinas' intentions and a revised Whiteheadian metaphysics complement each other on the topic of divine action in and through creatures and on the idea of existence as participation in the divine life. This offers a topic on which Thomists and process theologians might have a fruitful discussion.

Finally, although I do not have the space to develop this point here, it seems clear to me that this topic has important implications for understanding the importance of our care for the natural environment. Both Whitehead and Thomas Aquinas affirm that God acts through all agents in the universe, not just human beings. If we are persuaded that God is at work in nature, and even more that God values the natural world, then it immediately becomes clear to us that there is a sacrality or sacredness to the natural world that we dare not ignore or overlook. This in turn implies that our actions affecting the natural world have a moral character. In fact the distinction between actions affecting human beings and actions affecting the natural world is ultimately a false distinction. There is a unity to the universe and all our actions have moral character and consequences, whether they are directed at other human beings or at the natural world of which we are a part. Our treatment of the physical environment, then, becomes a religious question of ultimate importance since God is at work in nature. There is a rich religious basis for the concerns of environmental theology.

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